5

Fitting In Officially

I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member.

—Comedian and second-generation immigrant Groucho Marx, message to the Friar's Club of Beverly Hills, as reported in his autobiography

The decision to become a naturalized citizen of the United States is in some ways the ultimate sign of assimilation. Unlike other aspects of integration, however, the process of naturalization is governed as much by official policy as by any individual desire to join the ranks of the citizenry. Whereas some assimilation decisions, such as the choice to learn English, are fundamentally unilateral, naturalization is effectively the outcome of a bilateral negotiation between immigrant and host country. Immigrants may opt not to naturalize because they feel it is not worth their while; in some cases, however, policy leaves them with no choice.

Would a liberalization of naturalization policy lead large numbers of immigrants to obtain citizenship? Has the propensity of aliens to become naturalized citizens increased or decreased over the past century? These are questions of considerable importance. While numerous empirical studies of naturalization behavior have been conducted by economists and sociologists over the past few decades, our insight as to the answer is surprisingly limited.[1] The limitations are generally rooted in study design: most analyze only a single cross-sectional dataset, or at best one cohort observed over time.[2] Most studies examine exactly one policy regime, making it impossible to infer what the effects of policy might be. There have been some cross-country studies,

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but these are generally limited to a small number of nations.[3] Opining that policy makes some difference should generate little controversy—it is easy to imagine draconian initiatives that would eliminate naturalization.[4] But we have little sense of the degree to which policy makes a difference.

Although the academic literature is limited in this way, there are many important patterns to be taken from it. Economist Barry Chiswick, cited repeatedly in chapter 4 for his study of English language acquisition among immigrants, along with coauthor Paul Miller, studied naturalization patterns in the 2000 census and came to the conclusion that the decision to become a citizen is governed largely by perceived costs and benefits.[5] This pattern is entirely consistent with the rational choice framework presented in chapter 1. It has also been corroborated by studies of other time periods and of other nations. A widely cited study by sociologist Guillermina Jasso and economist Mark Rosenzweig, which analyzed immigrants who arrived in the United States in 1971, found that immigrants were more likely to naturalize when the option of returning to their home country was less attractive—either because that country was physically distant, or because living standards in that nation were low.[6] Some evidence also shows that refugees and asylees, who would presumably face negative consequences upon return to their home country, naturalize at elevated rates.[7] Chiswick and Miller's analysis identified factors including indices of political rights, civil liberties, and economic freedom as measures of the attractiveness of an immigrant's return option. These factors are all quite sensible in the context of a rational choice model of immigrant assimilation.[8] Questions remain, however, regarding the importance of host country policy rather than individual and origin country characteristics.

This chapter presents a long-run analysis of immigrant naturalization in the United States, which can answer both the basic question of what has happened over time and the more fundamental question of the impact of policy. In the United States, naturalization policy has undergone significant and complex change over time. The barriers to citizenship have been lowered for some groups and raised for others. In 1900, a non-English-speaking, unskilled European immigrant could become a citizen but a skilled professional born in an Asian country could not. A hundred years later, the opposite was true.[9] In spite of these differences, there has been little change in the overall rates of naturalization over the past century. Figure 5.1 shows the naturalization progress of six immigrant cohorts, the earliest arriving between 1896 and 1900, the latest between 2001 and 2005. Each cohort begins with very low naturalization rates—a completely unsurprising phenomenon, since American policy has always imposed some form of waiting period for most immigrants. By the time a cohort has spent twenty to twenty-five years in the United States, somewhere between 60 and 70 percent of its members have become naturalized citizens.

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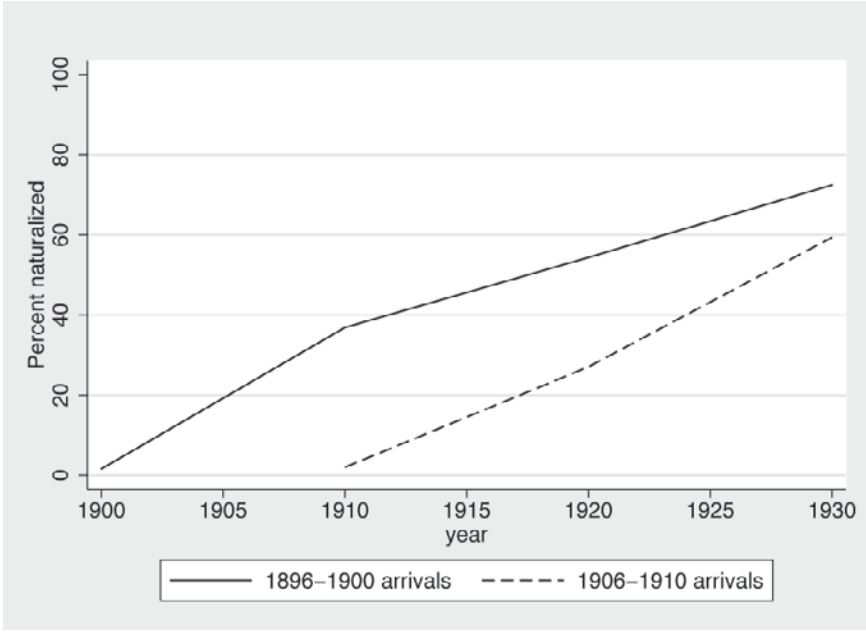

FIGURE 5.1A
Naturalization of Immigrant Cohorts, 1900–1930

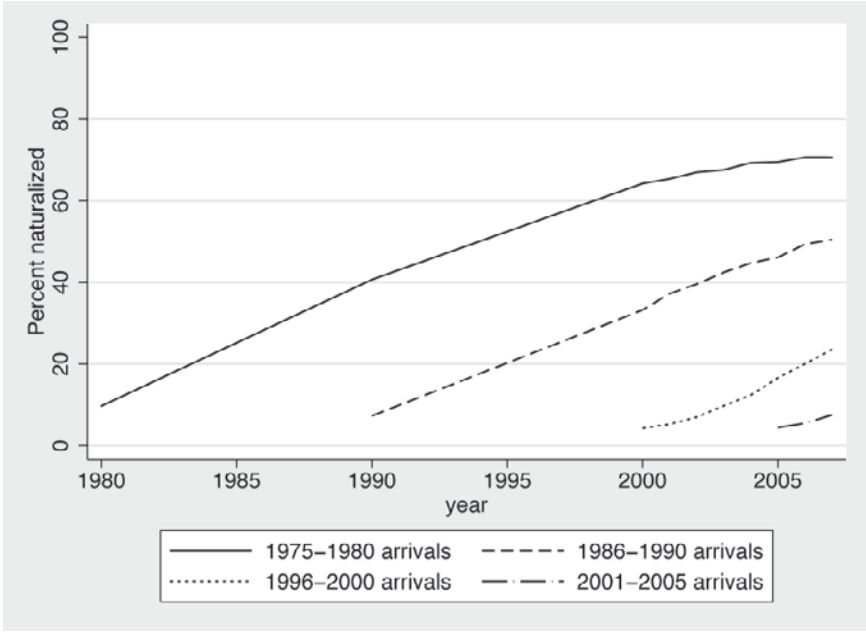

FIGURE 5.1B
Naturalization of Immigrant Cohorts, 1980–2007

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This quick glance at the data might tempt an observer to conclude that official policy plays little role in the naturalization process. Further inspection will radically alter this conclusion. Immigrants from Mexico, for example, naturalize at very low rates—not necessarily because they attach little value to American citizenship, but because so many hold only temporary visas, or reside in the country illegally.[10] Recent immigrants from Somalia, who are likely to be refugees or asylees, naturalize at higher rates in part because their status places them squarely on a path to citizenship. A change in official policy could well alter these patterns—and quite likely alter the raw number of immigrants entering the country as well. The behavior of some other immigrant groups, particularly those from wealthy nations, indicates that anything short of a draconian change to naturalization policy would have little effect. Importantly, the role of the English language requirement for most prospective citizens appears to be little impediment for those who desire to naturalize. There are some immigrants who value American citizenship very highly and will bear substantial costs to obtain it. There are others who could become citizens under very favorable circumstances if they so chose, and decline.

These patterns highlight an essential tension in naturalization policy: those immigrants we would most like to admit as permanent members of society are not always the ones who place the highest value on the offer. In the spirit of this chapter's epigraph, one might term this the Groucho Marx paradox. Naturalization policy can be tailored either to attract a certain type of immigrant from abroad or to reward those immigrants who place a high value on citizenship in the United States. In certain circumstances, these two goals might not be in conflict, but in early twenty-first century America they may well be. Naturalization policy debates thus encapsulate much of the more general debates on immigration policy: should government adopt a selective or inclusive policy toward immigration?

The Evolution of Naturalization Policy in the United States

In some respects, naturalization policy has changed little through American history; in others it has shifted radically. Since the first federal law on naturalization was passed in 1790, citizenship has been reserved for aliens who have met a minimum residency requirement, who have displayed "good moral character," and who can pass a test covering aspects of American history and government.[11] Through the years, racial restrictions on citizenship have fallen, an English language mandate has been imposed and then relaxed, and intermediate steps on the road to naturalization have been altered.

Table 5.1 tracks the evolution of naturalization policy in the United States from the colonial period to the twenty-first century.[12] In the colonial era, the

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TABLE 5.1
The Evolution of Naturalization Policy in the United States

Year	*Event*
1666	Maryland Assembly passes an act naturalizing one family; "private" naturalizations common in the colonial era.
1683	First naturalization statutes passed by New York and Pennsylvania.
1740	British parliament establishes a naturalization law for all colonies.
1783	Under the Articles of Confederation, states establish naturalization statutes
1790	Under the Constitution, Naturalization Act signed by George Washington. Requirements include two years' residence, one year's residence in the same state, "good moral character," oath of support. Eligibility restricted to free whites.
1795	Naturalization Act introduces declaration of intent requirement, three year "waiting period" after declaration, five years' total residence.
1798	Naturalization Act (one of the four Alien and Sedition acts) increases waiting period to five years and total residence requirement to fourteen years.
1802	The Naturalization Act of 1798 is repealed; rules of 1795 act reinstated, with some legal clarifications.
1828	Waiting period between declaration of intent and naturalization reduced to two years.
1855	Wife and children become citizens upon the naturalization of the husband/father. Automatic naturalization by marriage discontinued in 1922; at that point women must undergo the naturalization process individually.
1862	Declaration of intent waived for applicants with an honorable discharge from the U.S. Army. Privilege extended to Naval veterans in 1894; residency requirement waived for veterans with three or more years of service in 1918. Naturalization preferences for military personnel and veterans continue to exist.
1870	Naturalization Act extends privilege to immigrants of African origin.
1882	Chinese Exclusion Act affirms ineligibility of Chinese for naturalization while simultaneously prohibiting new immigration from China. Act was temporary, but renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902.
1898	Supreme Court, in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (169 U.S. 649) rules that children born in the United States to foreign-born parents are citizens except when the parents are in the country temporarily, are diplomats, or are members of a hostile occupying force.
1906	Basic Naturalization Act establishes the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, which has the authority to investigate petitions for citizenship, ensuring a greater degree of consistency across various courts. Candidates for citizenship must produce statements from witnesses. Requirement that candidate speak English introduced; other requirements generally maintained.
1913	Bureau of Naturalization becomes separate entity when the Department of Commerce and Labor is reorganized into separate Departments.
1933	Executive order creates the Immigration and Naturalization Service within the Department of Labor.

(*continued*)

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TABLE 5.1
(*continued*)

Year	*Event*
1940	The INS is relocated to the Department of Justice.
1943	Magnuson Act permits the naturalization of immigrants from China, while maintaining strict quotas on new entry.
1946	Luce-Celler Act extends right to naturalize to natives of India and the Philippines, while maintaining strict quotas on new entry. Natives of the Philippines had been considered U.S. nationals between 1898 and 1934.
1952	Immigration and Nationality (or McCarran-Walter) Act removes all remaining racial barriers to naturalization; removes declaration of intent requirement. Immigrants over fifty who have resided in the U.S. for twenty years exempted from English requirement. State residency requirement reduced to six months. Establishes framework for legal permanent residence and temporary visas.
1965	Hart-Celler Act, best known for eliminating national origin quotas, alters preferences for legal permanent residence, improving standing of aliens seeking permanent residence through family relationships.
1990	Immigration Act extends English exemption to immigrants over fifty-five who have resided in the United States for fifteen years; reduces state residency requirement to three months.
1995	State department conducts first "diversity lottery" for green cards.
2003	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service established within the Department of Homeland Security; INS ceases to exist.

question of granting citizenship was often undertaken on a case-by-case basis. Under the Articles of Confederation, each state had the authority to establish its own naturalization policy. Article I, section 8 of the Constitution transferred this authority to the federal government. In the dozen years after the ratification of the Constitution, Congress passed four different laws governing naturalization. While each law tinkered with the specifics of the naturalization process, the basic structure of the policy—a waiting period, a moral character clause, and an oath of loyalty—was established in 1790.

Over time, the barriers to citizenship embodied in naturalization law have ebbed and flowed with opinions toward immigration in general. The most restrictive naturalization law in American history was ushered in with the wave of Francophobia that spawned the Alien and Sedition acts in 1798; the law was repealed four years later. The requirement that immigrants speak English, introduced in 1906, was an early foray into immigration restriction that culminated in the quota system of the 1920s. Exemptions to this requirement were introduced in 1952 and 1990. For eighty years, the privilege of naturalization was restricted to whites only; racial restrictions were not completely abolished until the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952.

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Since 1906, the overriding tendency over time has been to relax citizenship requirements. State residency requirements have been relaxed twice, racial barriers have been eliminated, and a system of exemptions from the English language requirement instituted. Special privileges for members or veterans of the armed forces, present in some form since the Civil War, have been extended.

Although naturalization policy has been consistently relaxed for over a century, a secondary set of restrictions has always been in place. A system of national origin quotas for new immigrants remained in place until 1965. While the McCarran-Walter Act did remove some of the most odious barriers to citizenship, it also introduced the concept of legal permanent residence, making it a prerequisite for citizenship. Legal permanent residence, commonly referred to as obtaining a "green card," is a completely insurmountable barrier for certain immigrants.

The path to a green card is direct and uncomplicated for some—the spouse and young children of a citizen, highly skilled professionals, and asylum seekers.[13] Some other eligible immigrants face quotas that effectively introduce waiting periods of a decade or more, after which time they will be a mere five years from citizenship.[14] For an unskilled worker who is neither the child nor spouse of a citizen or permanent resident, nor the sibling of a citizen, there is no path to legal permanent residence or citizenship, with one exception. Immigrants born in relatively obscure foreign countries—ones that do not send a large number of emigrants to the United States—are eligible to participate in the "diversity lottery" for green cards. More than 6.4 million persons entered the 2008 diversity lottery, vying for fifty thousand permanent resident visas.[15] More than 98 percent of these entrants would go away empty-handed.[16] Entrants in the diversity lottery would be ten times more likely to win a prize if they bought an ordinary scratch-off ticket at an American gas station.[17] Especially when we factor in the obstacles to legal permanent residence, it is clear that between the early twentieth and early twenty-first century, the road to citizenship became much easier for some immigrants and much more difficult for others.

What Is the Goal of Naturalization Policy?

Understanding an immigrant's rationale for pursuing naturalization is straightforward. When government grants citizenship, it forgoes the right to deport an individual. From the immigrant's perspective, this is a valuable concession. What's more, several other rights of civic participation are bundled in. In theory, an immigrant must renounce his or her prior citizenship when taking

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the oath of loyalty to the United States. In practice, foreign governments do not necessarily recognize this renunciation and dual citizenship is accepted, if not exactly encouraged, under current American policy.[18] Thus, in the absence of real barriers we might expect all immigrants to pursue citizenship in the United States.

How exactly does granting citizenship serve the government's purposes? In exchange for giving up the right of deportation, the government is guaranteed little if anything. There is no requirement that citizens vote, work, or even reside in the United States. Legal permanent residents are liable for the same taxes as citizens, so there is no automatic fiscal benefit. Indeed, under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, citizens are eligible for certain public assistance programs while legal permanent residents are not. From a political perspective, granting citizenship threatens to dilute the power of the native-born. Concerns of this nature have driven previous efforts to impose more stringent naturalization requirements. If there is so little in the way of direct tangible benefit from naturalization, why does government permit it to happen?

One possible response to this question is that native-born Americans receive an intangible "warm glow" from extending offers of citizenship. While the nation's legacy of welcoming foreigners to its shores is undoubtedly a source of civic pride for many, there is an additional class of indirect but tangible benefits stemming from the use of naturalization as an incentive. By holding out the promise of naturalization, we encourage some immigrants to do things they might not otherwise do.

The government rationale for extending offers of citizenship is thus analogous to the use of frequent-flier loyalty programs. Airlines gain nothing through the actual exchange of seats for earned miles. They do, however, gain by encouraging travelers to alter their behavior, favoring one carrier over another (and possibly paying higher prices in the process) simply to accrue miles. Similarly, government and existing citizens benefit not from naturalization itself, but from the behaviors it encourages. The most obvious exhibit in this argument is the use of accelerated pathways to citizenship to encourage legal permanent residents—and in some cases, even nonpermanent visa holders—to serve in the armed forces. Less obviously, but more importantly, the offer of citizenship encourages an immigrant to come to the United States and remain on a narrow pathway of approved behavior—to exhibit the "good moral character" that has been a hallmark of naturalization policy since the beginning. Were immigrants permitted to enter the country, but prohibited from participating in the nation's civic life, one might worry that a wide range of subversive behaviors would ensue.

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Government can use naturalization policy to encourage certain types of immigrants to come to America, while discouraging others. At no point in our nation's history has the United States been willing to accept any foreign-born human being as a citizen. The nature of the selection process has changed over time. Early naturalization policy emphasized race and national origin. More recent naturalization policy continues to place some emphasis on national origin, for example in restricting the set of immigrants eligible for the diversity lottery, but places a much greater emphasis on economic priorities. Naturalization law is now designed to encourage skilled workers and entrepreneurs who are in short supply, or who hold out the promise of bringing jobs for locals along with them, to become permanent residents of the United States. Similar preferences can be found in other developed nations.[19]

These changes in naturalization policy over time offer, at least in theory, an opportunity to infer the role of policy in promoting or restricting immigrant decisions to become citizens. As already noted, however, there has been remarkably little change in the average propensity for immigrants to naturalize, dating back a century or more. It is conceivable that official policy has little impact on naturalization patterns—some immigrants may be willing to bear any burden in order to achieve citizenship, and others may be unwilling, perhaps because they are loathe to sacrifice their allegiance to their home country. It is also possible that the tracking of naturalization patterns over time is flawed in some technical sense. Finally, it is possible that this picture of long-term stability in the rate of naturalization masks important underlying trends. As we will soon learn, there is more to the story than figure 5.1 might indicate.

Does Naturalization Policy Matter?

Before poring over current and historical naturalization patterns in greater depth, it is worth assessing the just-raised concerns about data limitations. In chapter 4, we learned that changes in the way the Census Bureau collects information about language ability threaten the validity of long-run comparisons. These concerns are less obvious in the study of citizenship. Census enumerations began inquiring about respondents' citizenship in 1870. In that year, citizenship information was only collected for those with the potential right to vote: males over the age of twenty-one. Information on the citizenship of all foreign-born individuals was not collected until 1920. Until the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952, naturalization was a two-step process, the first step being a declaration of intent, with a waiting period

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imposed before a final hearing. Between 1900 and 1940, the Census Bureau separately coded those foreign-born persons who had declared intent but not yet completed the naturalization process. At no point were enumerators ever instructed to verify whether a respondent could properly document his or her naturalization. In the modern era of mailed census questionnaires, respondents are directly instructed to indicate whether they, and members of their household, are citizens of the United States.

The recording of citizenship status in the immigrant population appears quite consistent over time, in contrast to the collection of information regarding English-speaking ability. There may be some tendency to misreport citizenship status; immigrants may intentionally misrepresent their citizenship status, or might misunderstand the nature of the naturalization process. The nature of the distinction between legal permanent residency and citizenship may be obscure to some, for example. It is unclear whether the rate of misrepresentation would be higher in the interview era or the mail survey era. On the one hand, lying to a person is a more egregious act than checking the wrong box on a form. On the other hand, the incentive to misrepresent may be higher when facing a representative of the United States government. In any event, our confidence in the consistency of citizenship data is almost certainly stronger than our confidence in the consistency of measurement for economic status or English language ability.

Ruling out shifts in census methodology as an explanation for the patterns in figure 5.1, we are left with the question of why major shifts in naturalization policy did not alter basic naturalization patterns. A first partial answer to this apparent puzzle is that some changes to naturalization policy have had little practical impact. Many of the racial restrictions on naturalization in the early twentieth century were of little relevance, since they were trumped by restrictions on immigration in the first place. Government refusal to grant citizenship to natives of China, for example, had little impact on overall naturalization patterns because the Chinese Exclusion Act reduced the number of immigrants from China to near zero.

A second response to the puzzle is that basic naturalization patterns, covering all immigrants in an arrival cohort, do not adequately convey the variation in experiences of members of varying groups. Previous literature on the determinants of naturalization has established a number of important sources of variation across nationalities. Figure 5.2 displays one of the more prominent patterns, using data on immigrants from the 2007 American Community Survey. This scatterplot compares the naturalization rate for immigrants arriving in the United States between 1995 and 1999 to the economic standard of living in an immigrant's country of birth, as measured by GDP per capita.[20]

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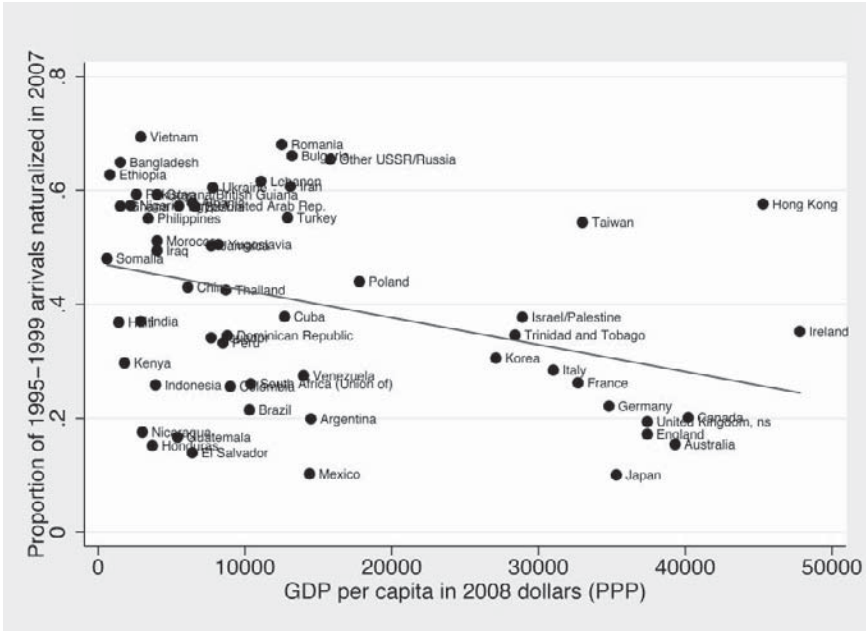

FIGURE 5.2
Birth Country and Naturalization Rate, 2007

As previous studies have documented, there is a noticeable negative relationship between home country living standards and naturalization rates.[21] The straight line superimposed on the chart is derived from an ordinary least squares regression, and is the line that statistically best represents the relationship between the two factors. It indicates that on average, naturalization rates drop 5 percent with every $5,000 increase in home country GDP per capita. Immigrants from developed nations, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Australia, and Germany, are unlikely to become naturalized citizens. At the other end of the spectrum, immigrants from poor countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh are much more likely to naturalize. The inverse relationship between home country living standards and naturalization in the United States makes sense from a rational choice perspective. Citizenship eliminates the threat of being sent back to one's home country. The economic cost associated with this threat is strongest when the home country is poor.

The role of policy forces can be most easily seen in the exceptions to the economic rule. Figure 5.3 replicates the image of the preceding plot, superimposing a "cross-hair" that neatly divides the data points into four quadrants.

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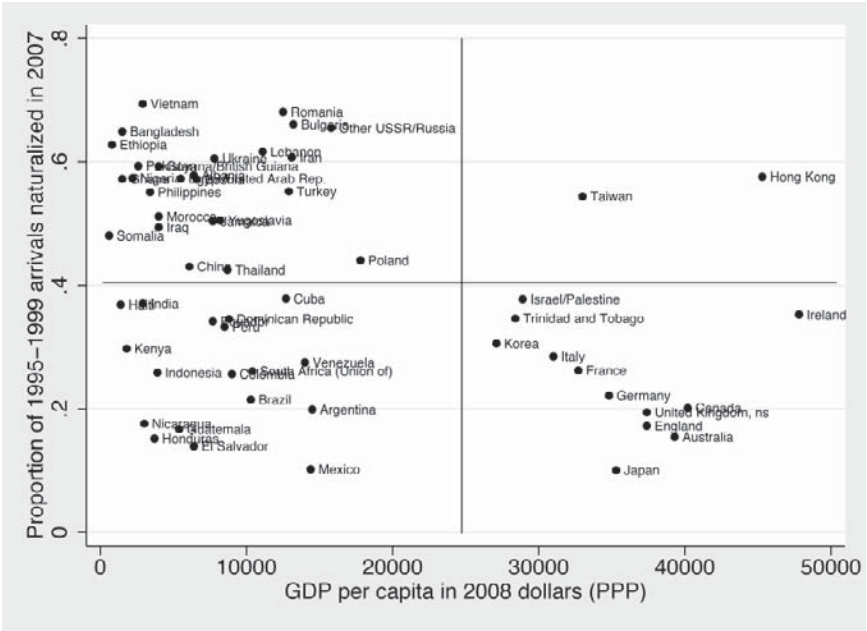

FIGURE 5.3
GDP and Naturalization Rate, 2007

Most of the data points lie in the upper left and lower right quadrants: poor origin countries with high naturalization rates and wealthy origin countries with low naturalization rates. There are only two nations in the upper right quadrant, wealthy countries of origin with high naturalization rates: Taiwan and Hong Kong. These two nations face a common source of uncertainty rooted in their nation's status relative to China. A political risk, the likelihood that living standards in their home nations will converge to the levels of mainland China, might explain these elevated naturalization rates.

The lower left quadrant is populated with a number of important immigrant-sending nations, including Mexico, a relatively poor nation with a naturalization rate at the very low end of the spectrum. Four Central American nations, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, are also noteworthy for their low naturalization rates. Five South American and three Caribbean origin countries also lie in this quadrant. Why is there so much heterogeneity in naturalization rates among immigrants from poor countries?

There are several answers to this question. In February 2009, the Department of Homeland Security released a report on the unauthorized immigrant population of the United States.[22] The report lists the ten most common

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countries of origin for illegal immigrants; seven of them appear in the lower left quadrant of figure 5.3. Two more (China and Korea) are just over the border. For many immigrants from these countries of origin, citizenship is not an option. Were an official amnesty to offer a path to legal permanent residency and citizenship, it is reasonable to think that naturalization rates for these immigrants would rise considerably. Following a general amnesty that offered illegal immigrants a route to citizenship, we might expect the nations in the lower left quadrant to ascend.

A second explanation for the disparity in naturalization between, say, Colombian and Ukrainian immigrants is the "wild card" route to citizenship: the diversity lottery for legal permanent residency, for which only the latter group is eligible. Among the eighteen countries of origin in the lower left quadrant, one-third were ineligible for the lottery as of 1999. Among the countries in the upper left, less than one-fifth are ineligible. While the number of green cards issued through the lottery is limited, the existence of family preferences for relatives of green card holders magnifies the effect of victory.[23] Thus, even in the absence of illegal immigration, restricted access to this special avenue to permanent residency and citizenship would lead to disparities.

Third, migrants from some relatively poor nations constitute the economic elite of their home country, while migrants from other nations do not. Mexico, Argentina, and Bulgaria have comparable living standards as measured by per capita GDP. Fewer than one in twenty Mexicans in the 2007 ACS has a college degree; by contrast nearly a third of the Argentines and more than half of the Bulgarians are college graduates. Higher education levels imply a greater likelihood of qualifying for legal permanent residence on the basis of occupational skills; prior studies of naturalization in the United States and other countries have identified educational attainment as an important predictor of citizenship.[24]

A fourth explanation for the differences in naturalization rates among immigrants from poor countries points toward the special status awarded refugees (who apply for residence while outside the United States) and asylees (who apply when already in the United States). Eight nations had more than five hundred accepted applications for asylum during fiscal 1999; six of those appear in the upper left quadrant of figure 5.3. The exceptions are Indonesia, in the lower left quadrant, and Liberia, which is not depicted in the figure but would have appeared in the lower left.[25] In theory, the number of admitted refugees is subject to an annual cap, but in recent years the number of admissions has remained well below the cap.[26]

All of these arguments point to the conclusion that naturalization rates among immigrants from Mexico and similar nations would rise dramatically if an amnesty policy opened a legal route to citizenship. It is also true, though,

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that many of the nations in the lower left quadrant are proximate to the United States. Thus, it may be possible that low naturalization rates are not entirely reflective of the lack of a legal option to become a citizen, but rather a lower willingness to take that option.

While this last argument is entirely plausible, one can find compelling rebuttals elsewhere on the chart. Presumably the distance argument would also apply to immigrants from Canada. While the naturalization rate of Canadian immigrants is low in an absolute sense, it is actually higher than the rates of naturalization for immigrants born in either the United Kingdom or Australia, two comparably wealthy and predominantly English-speaking nations at much greater distances from the United States. Given advances in transportation and communication technology, distance is likely much less of a barrier to migration than it once was.

The various rationalizations for the differences in naturalization rates across poor countries all point to the importance of policy. Restrictions on access to citizenship not only influence naturalization rates; they in part determine the number of immigrants who choose to locate in the United States. Were restrictions on naturalization to be dropped, the naturalization rates of many nations in the lower left quadrant of figure 5.3 would likely rise at least to some extent. What is more, the raw number of immigrants from nations in the upper left quadrant would likely also rise. For every winner of the State Department's green card diversity lottery, there are at least ninety-nine losers, individuals who would come to America and join the path to citizenship if given the chance. Some of them will come anyway, using temporary visas or entering the country without the authorization to stay or work, foregoing the path to citizenship but reaping economic rewards. The illegal route to residence and employment in the United States is easier to pursue from a proximate starting point.

Naturalization Among the Children of Immigrants

With one noteworthy exception, the naturalization rates of "Generation 1.5" immigrants, born abroad but raised in the United States, have been high for more than a century. Table 5.2 shows that the overall rate of naturalization for the middle-aged males born abroad but raised in the United States studied in chapter 3 ranges between 87 percent in 1900 to 76 percent in 2007. If we exclude Mexican-born immigrants from the 2007 sample, the overall naturalization rate climbs to 84 percent; Mexicans themselves have only a 60 percent naturalization rate, presumably because a high proportion of them came to the United States illegally as children. For other prominent nationali-

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TABLE 5.2
Naturalization Rates for Generation 1.5, 1900–2007

Year/Group	*Naturalization Rate*
1900	
Overall	86.7
Irish	87.7
German	90.5
Scandinavian	87.8
1930	
Overall	80.6
Italian	81.9
Russian	88.2
2007	
Overall	75.7
All nationalities except Mexico	83.5
Mexican	59.6
Filipino	91.2
Korean	94.5
Vietnamese	92.9

Note: Sample consists of adult males born abroad, arriving in the United States by the age of five, between the ages of thirty and forty at time of enumeration.

ties within today's Generation 1.5, naturalization rates are high by historical standards, above 90 percent.

What Is the Impact of the English Language Requirement?

While the above analysis indicates that naturalization law imposes restrictions that limit both access to citizenship and rates of immigration for some emigrants, it does not directly address one of the most controversial aspects of current policy. Immigrants over the age of fifty who have lived in the United States for at least twenty years, or those over fifty-five who have lived in the US for fifteen years, may apply to take the required civics examination in their native language. On the one hand, this does permit foreign-born individuals with absolutely no knowledge of the English language to become citizens—provided that they are permanent residents and otherwise meet the requirements of citizenship. On the other hand, it is not clear that a large number of older immigrants both desire to become citizens and do not understand English.

There are several empirical methods of assessing the importance of the English language exemptions. Among those immigrants who arrived in the United States at least twenty years ago, is there a noticeable upward tick in

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citizenship rates among those who qualify for the English exemption at ages fifty and higher? Among those immigrants fifty to fifty-four years of age, is the rate of citizenship higher for those who arrived more than twenty years ago? Figure 5.4 shows the answer to the first question, plotting the naturalization rates among immigrants with twenty years' or more residence in the United States, by age. Immigrants over fifty clearly have higher citizenship rates on average, but there is also an overall tendency toward higher citizenship at older ages, even for those immigrants age forty-nine and lower. There is no evidence of an upward spike in citizenship for those who reach age fifty.

Figure 5.5 addresses the second empirical question, showing the naturalization rates of fifty- to fifty-four-year-old immigrants in 2007, by year of arrival. Those arriving in 1987 or earlier would be eligible to take citizenship tests in their native language. There is a clear tendency for immigrants arriving in earlier years to display higher naturalization rates, consistent with evidence presented earlier in this chapter and in much prior work on the subject, but no distinct uptick for those who arrived in 1987 or earlier. Among those age fifty to fifty-four, the naturalization rate among those with nineteen years in the United States is just about equal to the rate for those with twenty to twenty-three years in the United States. Seen either way, there is little evidence

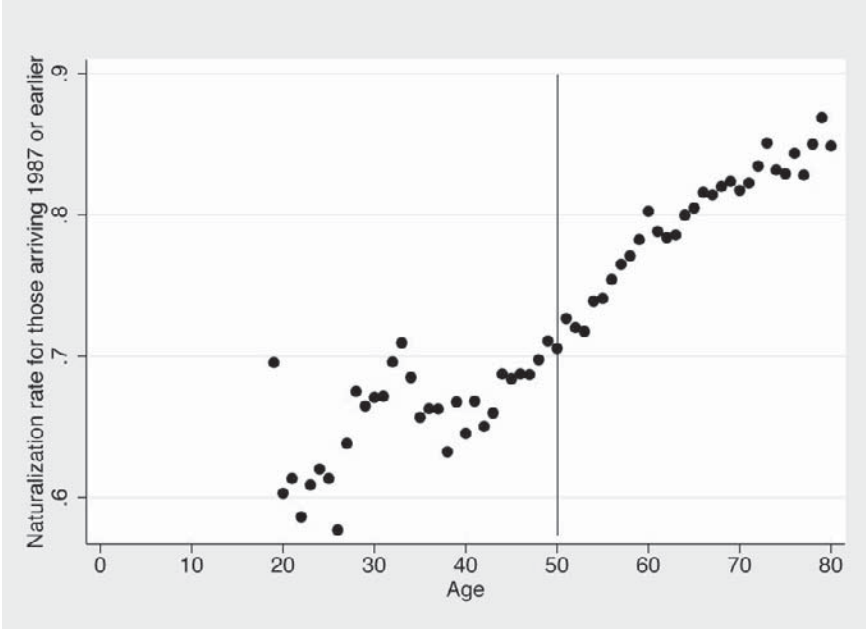

FIGURE 5.4
Age and Naturalization Rate, 2007

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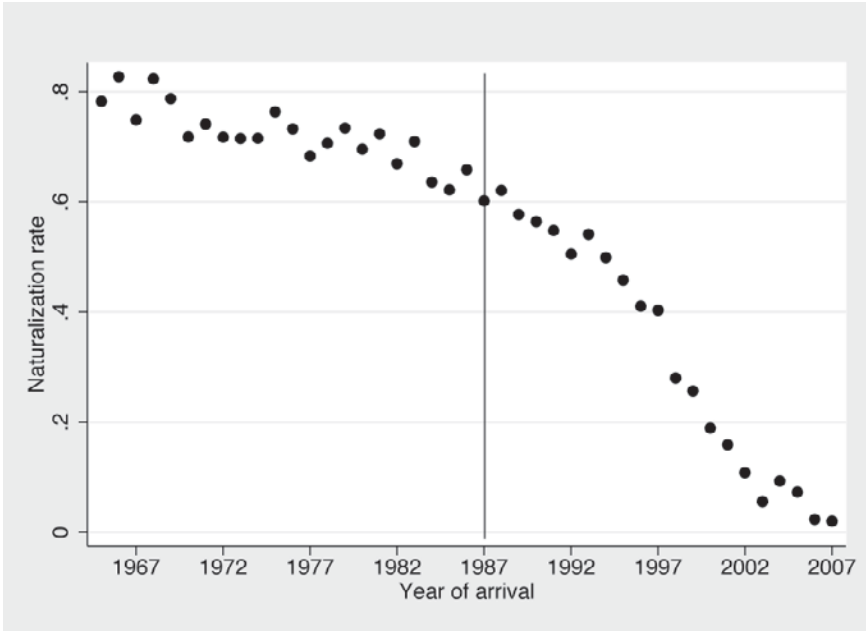

FIGURE 5.5
Naturalization Rate of Fifty- to Fifty-Four-Year-Old Immigrants, 2007

of a mass of non-English-speaking immigrants waiting to qualify for an exemption on the citizenship exam.

The English requirement was imposed in 1906. Coupled with the five-year residency requirement, this implies that non-English-speaking immigrants seeking citizenship who arrived in 1902 or later were at a distinct disadvantage relative to those who arrived in 1900 or earlier. Figure 5.6 provides one more check of the importance of the English requirement, plotting the naturalization rates of Italian immigrants in 1920 by year of arrival. Once again, there is clear evidence that naturalization is more likely among those immigrants with longer tenure in the United States, but no evidence of a discrete drop in naturalization rates for those immigrants subjected to the English language requirement. A relatively smooth downward-sloping line could be drawn through the points on the graph.

In summary, the evidence on the importance of English language requirements is rendered difficult to interpret by the simple fact that naturalization takes time, and older immigrants or those with more time in the United States will tend to have higher citizenship rates under all circumstances. Bearing this caveat in mind, there is little to suggest that substantial numbers of immigrants hope to gain citizen status without learning English.

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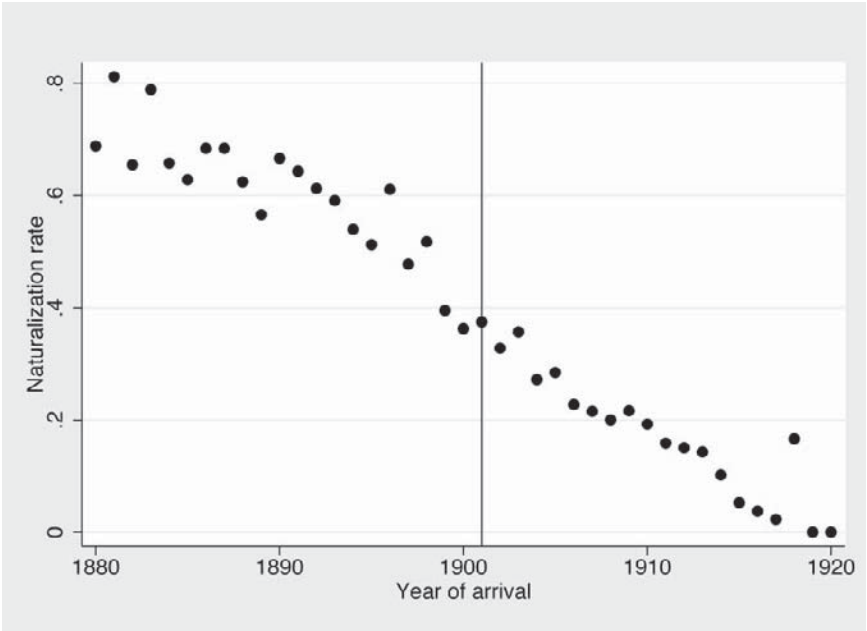

FIGURE 5.6
Naturalization of Italian Immigrants by Year of Arrival, 1920

What Have We Learned?

As becoming a citizen is a costly process, the willingness of legal residents to undergo the process mirrors the value that immigrants place on citizenship. Over a period of time, if the costs of naturalization remain roughly constant, declines in naturalization rates imply a declining valuation of citizenship. Conversely, increased naturalization rates suggest that immigrants' valuation of citizenship is increasing.

Have the costs of naturalization remained constant over time? For a native of China in 1900, the cost was effectively infinite; for prospective immigrants facing racial barriers, the costs have clearly fallen. If we restrict our attention, though, to those immigrants legally permitted to enter the United States at any given point in time, the overriding trend in the costs of citizenship has been upward. The avenues to legal permanent residence have been both narrowed and lengthened. Many immigrants would jump at the offer of a green card if given the chance; a relaxation of the restrictions on their availability would undoubtedly result in a substantial increase in the net inflow of migrants to the United States.

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The costs have increased, yet overall the rate of naturalization in the immigrant population has remained relatively steady over the past century. The logical conclusion from this pattern is that the valuation of American citizenship has increased over the past hundred years. This reflects both the value of guaranteed access to the American labor market, and access to the less tangible qualities of life in the United States that remain scarce in other parts of the world.[27]

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